'Hunger Games' sports strong female lead, hints at social commentary

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PATRICK HALL
The Wilson Post

“The Hunger Games” raked in tons of cash at the box office this past weekend, and while complaints about the teen violence seem to be racking up, too, the film presents a strong female heroine, robust characters hints at some major social commentary.

The film, which is based on the first in a trilogy of young-adult novels by **Suzanne Collins** and directed by
Gary
Ross
, tells the story of a dystopian futuristic North America, now known as Panem.
Collins
,
Ross
and
Billy
Ray
wrote the script for the movie. The nation is divided into a wealthy, decadent “Capitol” city and 12 dirt-poor districts that toil for resources that the people living in the Capitol need.

What payment do the district inhabitants receive for giving the Capitol all the necessities they need? They have to offer one male and one female, age 12 to 18, each year to the “Hunger Games,” so that they can fight to the death in the mass-media public spectacle to “honor” their district.

The Hunger Games were created to punish the 12 districts that were said to have rebelled against the Capitol some 70 years ago.

The lead character, Katniss Everdeen, played astonishingly well by **Jennifer Lawrence**, from District 12, volunteers for the games so her 12-year-old younger sister Primrose, can avoid the almost-certain death trap.

Joining Katniss is Peeta Mellark, played by **Josh Hutcherson**, who vows to die on his own terms if need be and show the Capitol and the government that “they don’t own” him.

The two main characters enter the games after being trained and coached by former winner from District 12, Haymitch Abernathy, played by **Woody Harrelson**. Both struggle to survive in their own ways, with their own motivations, until a calculating “game maker” Seneca (
Wes
Bentley
) and President Snow (
Donald
Sutherland
) turn the tides and change the rules of the game.

Lawrence’s character Katniss is a strong and incredible heroine, fighting for her family’s survival. She hunts regularly with a bow and arrow at home and is quite skilled with the weapon as well in tracking her prey.

Peeta has less-appropriate skills for the games and is quickly pushed aside and must grow up quick, coming to grips with his fate and taking whatever steps necessary to survive as long as possible.

It’s almost impossible to not compare this to the most recent young-adult novel and movie phenomenon “Twilight,” and “Games” actually brings a wealth of depth, characterization and commentary to the stories that “Twilight” fails to reach.

Katniss and Peeta struggle to either rebel against the system to almost certain death, or play the “game” to ensure the best chances of winning. Haymitch constantly pushes Katniss to kow-tow to “sponsors” and the public to look good in their eyes. Receiving sponsors for the games actually nets little care packages for the competitors as they survive in the arena.

A major theme I saw in the film is the comparison between “The Hunger Games” and modern reality shows. The games are annually televised to the whole nation and the Capitol citizens are absolutely bonkers about watching teenagers kill one another in brutal fashion.

Of course, there are no brutal deaths on our current reality television shows, but the public fawns over watching individuals humiliate and manipulate one another or drunkenly wander around from night club to night club and fighting over superficial nonsense.

Just like our “reality” shows, “The Hunger Games” are more scripted and events are manipulated behind the scenes more than the people care to admit.

“The Hunger Games” shows us a society that has become completely immune to the spectacle of humiliation, death and violence. Something that one could argue has come to our culture due to mass media and the like.

Katniss does whatever she has to do in order to survive and make it home to care for her sister. She’s fighting for her life and a noble cause from the beginning, while Peeta is helplessly in love with Katniss and is looked upon as fodder by Haymitch and others.

The most incredibly fascinating character is Haymitch, who oozes a genuine disdain for the world he has become a part of by winning a previous Hunger Games. While he trains Katniss to “win,” he tells her to play the game while also showing real contempt for it, hinting at the fact that he traded his own morals just to survive.

Surely, later in the trilogy, we will see the consequences of Katniss giving in to the system, mirrored with whatever happened with Haymitch when he won the Hunger Games.

Peeta, Katniss and Haymitch were all very well developed, each delivering fine performances, but Lawrence really excelled as the heroine. Sympathy is created for Katniss and Peeta exceptionally well.

The violence is to some degree surprising, but rarely directly on-screen. Alluding to the young peoples' brutal deaths isn't much better, but it allows the PG-13 rating to stick. As I've been told, the deaths on screen are less brutal and descriptive as they are in the novels.

The film's few faults are the dizzying and nauseating camera work that shows much of the first half-hour from the perspective of about 6 inches away from everything. The director eventually, thankfully, pulls back and generates excellent tension and suspense during the scenes in the forest arena.

The movie's ending did leave room for the eventual sequel, including future plot points with Katniss' District 12 companion Gayle Hawthorne, played by **Liam Hemsworth**. But the film didn't allude to any events to come at its finale.

"Games" is definitely worth a look especially considering how well Lawrence portrays Katniss and shows off the character's strength and determination. It's a great departure from the Bella Swann character of "Twilight" who requires Hunk A or Hunk B to save her at every moment. Katniss, in my mind, is a much better female role model for the young audiences these stories have been targeting.

My wife has read the trilogy and offered her own insight, from the perspective of the novels' fans, into the first movie as well: "It portrayed the novel as well as a movie can. They developed the characters well and actually gave you a visual of The Hunger Games you have only imagined.

"They had difficulty portraying Katniss' state of mind that is shown during the first book, since most of it is spent in her thoughts. I liked the movie and it portrayed the book well as far as being true to the book but I felt you missed out on a lot of Katniss' feelings."

"The Hunger Games" is rated PG-13 and is playing in local theaters with a run time of 142 minutes.

Staff Writer Patrick Hall may be contacted at This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it

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